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How Thomas Jefferson Read the Qur'ān

Located on the north side of the Duke of Gloucester Street, the printing office of the *Virginia Gazette* had lured Thomas Jefferson within its doors countless times since he first came to Williamsburg to study at the College of William and Mary. Back in Williamsburg for the fall session of the General Court in 1765, Jefferson was busy reading law and helping George Wythe prepare cases for trial. His own formal legal training was coming to a close. The surviving *Virginia Gazette* daybooks hint that he was studying for his bar examination in early autumn, when he purchased a copy of *Grounds and Rudiments of Law and Equity*, a general survey that would have made an ideal study guide (Dewey 119). On another visit to the *Gazette* office this autumn, Jefferson purchased a copy of the Qur'ān, specifically, George Sale's English translation, *The Koran, Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed*, recently republished in a handy two-volume edition (*Virginia*, fol. 202).

Jefferson's purchase of the Qur'ān at this time may have been inspired by his legal studies, too. The interest in natural law he developed as a student encouraged him to pursue his readings in this area as widely as possible. The standard work in the field, Frieherr von Pufendorf's *Of the Law and Nature and Nations*, gave readers an almost endless number of possible references to track down and thus offered Jefferson an excellent guide to further reading. Pufendorf's treatise is rife with citations to diverse sources extending well beyond legal and political tracts and including works from many different times, places, and cultures.

Though Pufendorf's work reflects a prejudice against Islam characteristic of the time in which it was written, he nonetheless cited precedent from the Qur'ān in several instances. Discussing the issue of murder and revenge, for example, Pufendorf referred to a passage from the Qur'ān and, furthering his argument, linked the passage to similar ones from the works of Homer and Tacitus in order to emphasize ideas they shared (324). In addition, Pufendorf found the Qur'ān pertinent to a number of other im-

portant issues: adultery, laws of succession, marriage, the prohibition of gambling, the prohibition of wine, and the validity of warfare.

Regarding this last issue, Pufendorf could not help but admit that the Qur'ān contained advice pertinent to readers of all nations: "And Christians should all the more zealously undertake to compose the quarrels of others, because even the Koran . . . teaches that if two Moslem nations and countries engage one another in war, the rest shall make peace between them, and compel him who committed the injury to offer satisfaction; and when this is done, bring them by fair and good means to friendship" (831). To be sure, the call for peace and cooperation Pufendorf found in the Qur'ān deserves the attention he gives it. Jefferson's surviving legal papers show that he came to know Pufendorf's *Of the Law of Nature and Nations* thoroughly. No other work does he cite more frequently in his legal writings (Dewey 65). Pufendorf's work revealed the relevance of the Qur'ān to the interpretation of the law.

Jefferson acquired his Qur'ān not long after the injustice of the Stamp Act had forced him to question seriously the heritage of English constitutional law and to seek ultimate answers in the ideas of natural law and natural rights. Given the fact that he was devoting most of his time to the study of law, Jefferson could justify studying the Qur'ān simultaneously because it, too, was a lawbook. Being, as Muslims believe, the revealed word of God, the Qur'ān not only constitutes the sacred scripture of the Islamic faith, it also forms the supreme source of Islamic law. Wanting to broaden his legal studies as much as possible, Jefferson found the Qur'ān well worth his attention.

Reading the Qur'ān also let him continue studying the history of religion. Entries he made in his literary commonplace book about the same time he purchased Sale's *Koran* show that he was seeking to reconcile contradictions between history and scripture that were becoming increasingly apparent to him. His curiosity about Islam is consistent with the interest the commonplace book reflects regarding how traditional religious customs and beliefs are transmitted from one culture to another. Passages from Herodotus Jefferson copied into his book in late 1765, for instance, show him attempting to reconcile how the practice of circumcision—a Jewish custom that, according to the Old Testament, was mandated by God as a token of his covenant with the Jewish people—could be found in ancient times from Egypt to Syria (Wilson 23).

By no means was Jefferson the only or earliest colonial Virginian to express an interest in Islam. Some African slaves, after all, were originally Muslims, though their conversion to Christianity came as a matter of course. Among members of Virginia's Anglican hegemony, others learned about Islam sometimes by reading the Qur'ān or biographies of Muhammad, but more often by reading histories and travel narratives of the Near East. To take another colonial Virginia bookman for example, William Byrd II of Westover developed a curiosity about Islam, which began at least as early as 1701, the year he traveled around England with Sir John Percival.

Upon meeting English Orientalist Humphrey Prideaux on their travels, Byrd characterized him as someone who valued himself particularly for his expertise in Arabic, "by virtue of which he has convers'd more with the Alcoran and the comments upon it, than some other doctors have with the Bible" (211). Prideaux's example encouraged Byrd to learn more about Islam. He acquired a copy of the Qur'ān, specifically, the imperfect English translation derived from André Du Ryer's imperfect French version (Hayes, no. 1915). This edition made no attempt to mask its skepticism toward Islam. Its title page announced that the translation was submitted to the English-reading public "for the satisfaction of all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities." It even contained an address to those who wondered if reading the Qur'ān could be hazardous to their Christian faith.

Though Byrd complimented Prideaux for his knowledge of the Qur'ān, Prideaux was actually responsible for disseminating much misinformation regarding Islam and its prophet. His fullest treatment of the subject, *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet*, was written mainly as a polemic against Deism. Prideaux had intended to use his in-depth knowledge of Islam to write a history of Constantinople's fall to the Muslims, but the religious indifference he witnessed in late seventeenth-century England prompted him to write a kind of cautionary tale instead. He sought to show Anglican readers that if they ignored their devotions, they ran the risk of being overcome by a religious zealot with the capacity to subjugate all nations to his will (Allison 37). As Prideaux retold the life of the prophet, Muhammad was both an impostor and a tyrant. From this point of view, the rapid spread of Islam offered an object lesson in the dangers of religious apathy.

Taken for what it purported to be, a biography of Muhammad, Prideaux's *Life of Mahomet* prejudiced many Anglo-American readers against

Islam. His message was read sympathetically by devout Protestants of the late seventeenth century, and the book was reprinted multiple times during the eighteenth. Thomas Bray, the indefatigable Anglican minister who arranged for numerous collections of theological works to be disseminated among Anglican clergymen and parishioners in North America, included copies of Prideaux's *Life of Mahomet* among the shipments of books he sent to the American colonies (Wolf 14). Recommending Prideaux, Bray cast fear into his readers' hearts: if they were not sincere in their Christian devotions, they ran the risk of being overrun by false religions and overcome by tyranny.

The writings of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon gave the kind of inflammatory ideas Prideaux's *Life of Mahomet* propagated even greater currency throughout colonial America. Their collaborative works, *The Independent Whig* and *Cato's Letters*, are best known for their profound influence on the development of early American attitudes toward liberty and representative government. To make their arguments for free speech and freely elected leaders, Trenchard and Gordon specifically used Turkey and, more generally, the Muslim state as negative examples. Islam, they argued, spread from one geographical region to another through violent conquest: it spread by the sword, not the word. Oppression, they argued, was characteristic of Islamic nations. In Turkey, for instance, the tyrannical Muslim leaders oppressed their people by forbidding them to question the government or to express their opinions at all. Trenchard and Gordon asserted that printing was forbidden there, inquiry dangerous, and free speech a capital crime because all were inconsistent with Islam (Jacobson 35).

Jefferson's early writings contain no references to either the Qur'ān or Islam. In his youth, he likely held much the same opinion toward the Muslim state that Prideaux, Trenchard, and Gordon perpetuated. Jefferson was not a person to let such uninformed assumptions last for long, however. He always tried to learn as much as he could about any subject before passing judgment on it—unlike such hypocrites as those Henry Fielding spoofs through the character of the Reverend Mr. Barnabas in *Joseph Andrews*. In one conversation in this novel, the Reverend Mr. Adams suggests to the hypocritical Barnabas that he would prefer the company of "a virtuous good Turk" over that of "a vicious and wicked Christian." Aghast, Barnabas is anxious to end the conversation before Adams starts commending the Qur'ān. Adams, on the other hand, is curious to learn why Barnabas ob-

jects so strongly to the Qu'rān and asks him why. "I never read a syllable in any such wicked book," Barnabas responds. "I never saw it in my life, I assure you" (81). Quite unlike the Reverend Mr. Barnabas, Jefferson would read the Qu'rān for himself before he dared to raise objections to it.

Acquiring his own copy, Jefferson revealed his open-minded desire to learn more about Islam. Reading George Sale's translation, he had the opportunity to receive a fair view of the religion. Originally published in 1734, Sale's was the first English version to be translated directly from the Arabic. Not only was his translation more reliable than André Du Ryer's, Sale also wrote "A Preliminary Discourse," a thoroughly researched and well documented overview of Islam that ran to nearly two hundred pages in the first edition and filled the entire first volume of the second. Sale's *Koran* was a landmark of scholarship, and his translation would remain the standard English version into the twentieth century.

Publishing his edition of the Qur'ān in a Protestant European nation during the eighteenth century, Sale, of course, could not present a fully objective view of Islam. Though he does refer to Muhammad as both an infidel and an impostor, his overall treatment of Islam is remarkably evenhanded. "A Preliminary Discourse" elaborates the life of Muhammad and emphasizes his personal virtues. Sale also supplied detailed discussions of Islamic history, theology, and law. His scholarship and dedication to his subject allowed him to refute many of the common prejudices against Islam current in Western culture. For example, he challenged the vulgar error that Islam was spread by the sword. Muhammad, as Sale told his story, propagated Islam not by military force but by dint of eloquence.

His introductory materials to the translation prompted readers to approach the Qur'ān as a lawbook. Sale, after all, was a member of the Inner Temple and a practicing solicitor. The dedication refers to Muhammad as "the legislator of the *Arabs*" who "gave his *Arabs* the best religion he could, as well as the best laws, preferable, at least, to those of the ancient pagan lawgivers" (sig. A1). Addressing his English readers, Sale suggested that "if the religious and civil Institutions of foreign nations are worth our knowledge, those of *Mohammed*, the lawgiver of the *Arabians*, and founder of an empire which in less than a century spread itself over a greater part of the world than the *Romans* were ever masters of, must needs be so" (iii). Since students of law study legal precedent from ancient Rome, they should also study precedent from a society with an even greater reach than Rome.

The sixth section of Sale's "Preliminary Discourse" contained much information pertinent to Jefferson's ongoing study of civil law. Entitled "Of the Institutions of the *Koran* in Civil Affairs," this section begins with a comparison between Islamic law and Jewish law: "The *Mohammedan* civil law is founded on the precepts and determinations of the *Koran*, as the civil laws of the *Jews* were on those of the *Pentateuch*" (132). The section discusses Islamic laws of marriage and divorce, inheritance, private contracts, murder, manslaughter, and theft.

Regarding punishment for theft under Islamic law, for example, Sale wrote: "Theft is ordered to be punished by cutting off the offending part, the hand; which, at first sight, seems just enough: but the law of *Justinian*, forbidding a thief to be maimed, is more reasonable; because stealing being generally the effect of indigence, to cut off that limb would be to deprive him of the means of getting his livelihood in an honest manner" (140). Revising the laws of Virginia some years later, Jefferson revealed that he had thought long and hard about the suitability of punishment to crime. As he explained the ideas underlying his well-known "Bill for Proportioning Crimes and Punishments" to his friend and mentor George Wythe when he sent him a copy of it, "An eye for an eye, and a hand for a hand will exhibit spectacles in execution whose moral effect would be questionable" (*Papers* 2: 230).

Sale's "Preliminary Discourse" gave Jefferson the kind of detailed information he most appreciated. Sale cited precedent from Roman civil law and supplied footnotes to other pertinent works—including Pufendorf's *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*. Through Sale's annotations, the Qur'ān brought Jefferson back to the work that may have led him to it in the first place.

The references to the Qur'ān in Jefferson's papers, though few, reveal how he understood the book in terms of religion, law, and culture. His placement of the Qur'ān in the manuscript library catalogue he prepared in 1783 indicates how he understood Islam in relation to other religions. Overall, Jefferson grouped titles together into several broad subject areas, which he called chapters within the catalogue. He listed Sale's *Koran* in chapter 17, "Religion" (Gilreath and Wilson 58). The titles within each chapter are precisely organized, too, but Jefferson's organizational schemes differ from one chapter to the next. Though he carefully organized the titles in each chapter, he never recorded the principles he used to determine individual

chapter organization. What his correspondence makes clear, however, is that he devoted enough time and thought to arranging the contents of the individual chapters to become irritated when others ignored his organization.

After Jefferson sold his personal library to the United States government to form the basis of the Library of Congress, the librarian there published a catalogue of the books that retained Jefferson's chapter divisions yet rearranged the contents of each chapter into alphabetical order. Critiquing those responsible for preparing the catalogue, Jefferson wrote a correspondent: "The form of the catalogue has been much injured in the publication; for although they have preserved my division into chapters, they have reduced the books in each chapter to alphabetical order, instead of the chronological or analytical arrangements I had given them" (*Writings* 1378). The phrase, "chronological or analytical arrangements" is the only indication Jefferson provided regarding the organization of books within the individual chapters. Basically, what he was saying was that he had either organized the books chronologically, or he had devised some other logical pattern to arrange them. Some patterns are easier to discern than others.

Jefferson's organizational scheme for the religious books that constitute chapter 17 is not readily apparent. Sale's *Koran* comes fourth in the list. Preceding it are three works explaining religious beliefs from ancient Greek and Roman times: *Sibyllina Oracula*, a collection of Greek oracles edited by the French Calvinist Sébastien Chateillon; William King's *Historical Account of the Heathen Gods and Heroes*, the most popular classical handbook of the time; and *New Pantheon: Or, Fabulous History of the Heathen Gods, Goddesses, Heroes, &c*, an encyclopedic work compiled by Grub Street writer Samuel Boyse. Following the Qur'ān in the list are multiple copies of the Old Testament, editions of the Bible incorporating both Old and New Testaments, and several copies of the New Testament in a number of different scholarly editions.

At first glance, the organization generally seems chronological. The list starts with an edition of pagan oracles that had extraordinary influence in shaping the religious views of ancient times. What follows are two reference works useful for understanding the numerous gods and goddesses that constitute Greek and Roman mythology. From these beginnings, the catalogue eventually proceeds through Judaism to Christianity. The place-

ment of the Qur'ān, which, of course, was much more recent than the sacred scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, disrupts the chronology, however. Its text was purportedly revealed to Muhammad during the first third of the seventh century, memorized by his followers, and collected in book form after Muhammad's death. In terms of historical chronology, the Qur'ān belonged after Jefferson's collection of New Testaments. The Qur'ān made use of some of the same exemplary figures as the Hebrew Bible—Abraham, most important—and its text even contains specific references to Christians and Christianity. Alternatively, the Qur'ān itself made its removal from historical chronology justifiable. The text of the Qur'ān supposedly transcends matters of chronology. As the word of God, it exists outside of time.

Jefferson did not remove the Qur'ān from its historical place because of its timelessness, however. Rather, his religious books, as organized in the manuscript catalogue, follow an analytical scheme that closely mirrors a chronological one. The idea of progress underlies Jefferson's organization of his religious books, and the list suggests a general progression from pagan to Christian. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson would display a nonchalant indifference to monotheism and atheism, stating that it little mattered to him were his neighbor "to say there are twenty gods, or no god" (*Writings* 285). The library catalogue, on the other hand, suggests that Islam, as a monotheistic religion, represented an advance over the pantheism of ancient times. The organization of the library catalogue implies that the Islamic belief system was an improvement over the pagan religions yet fell short of the belief system Christianity represented.

A comment Jefferson inscribed in his copy of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* confirms the attitude toward Islam implicit within the manuscript library catalogue. Jefferson placed his marginal inscription to correspond to a late passage in the *History*, where Gibbon told the story of Mahomet II's arrival in St. Sophia during the fifteenth century. Relating how Mahomet II commanded that the Christian cathedral be transformed into a mosque, Gibbon wrote:

> By his command, the metropolis of the Eastern church was transformed into a mosch: the rich and portable instruments of superstition had been removed; the crosses were thrown down; and the walls, which were covered with images and mosaics, were washed and purified, and re-

> stored to a state of naked simplicity. On the same day, or on the ensuing Friday, the *muezin* or crier ascended the most lofty turret, and proclaimed the ezan, or public invitation in the name of God and his prophet, the imam preached; and Mahomet the second performed the *namez* of prayer and thanksgiving on the great altar, where the Christian mysteries had so lately been celebrated before the last of the Caesars. (52)

Upon reading this passage, Jefferson recalled lines from "Carthon," one of Ossian's poems, and inscribed the following at the bottom of the page: "I have seen the walls of Balclutha, but they were desolate. The stream of Clutha was removed from it's place by the fall of the walls. The thistle shook there it's lonely head. The moss whistled to the wind. The fox looked out from the windows: the rank grass of the wall waved round his head." Reading about this Muslim takeover of a Christian cathedral, Jefferson compared it to watching an ancient edifice being returned to a state of nature. For Jefferson, Mahomet II and his followers are like the fox and thistle in Ossian, symbols of the decay, not progress.

A reference to the Qur'ān Jefferson made in his correspondence helps elaborate his attitude toward it as both a religious work and a lawbook. In a letter to a sympathetic friend, he specifically associated the Qur'ān with the study of law: "I have long lamented with you the depreciation of law science. The opinion seems to be that Blackstone is to us what the Alcoran is to the Mahometans, that everything which is necessary is in him, and what is not in him is not necessary" (*Writings* 1226). Though Jefferson invokes the Qur'ān largely as a means of critiquing William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Law of England*, the comparison he makes between the two reveals that he associated the Qur'ān with the reading of law and suggests how he understood the Qur'ān. Furthermore, the comparison makes Jefferson's other critiques of Blackstone useful for understanding his attitude toward the Qur'ān.

Blackstone's *Commentaries*, needless to say, was a landmark legal text. Blackstone began publishing his great work in 1765, that is, just as Jefferson was finishing his formal legal studies. After passing the bar himself, Jefferson began overseeing the legal education of many other young men. He initially embraced Blackstone and recommended the work to those studying the law. The more he thought about it, however, the more dangerous

it seemed. Blackstone's *Commentaries* made such a pretense toward comprehensiveness that it gave law students tacit permission to neglect other pertinent books and avoid interpreting the law from alternate perspectives. In his strongest condemnation of the work and its author, Jefferson stated that Blackstone's *Commentaries* "has been perverted more than all others to the degeneracy of legal science. A student finds there a smattering of everything, and his indolence easily persuades him that if he understands that book, he is master of the whole body of the law" (qtd. in Sowerby, no. 1806). Given Jefferson's analogy between the two works, his characterization of Blackstone's *Commentaries* can be paraphrased to apply to the Qur'ān: Muslims find there a smattering of everything and persuade themselves that if they understand that book, they have mastered Islam.

Authorities on Islamic law observe that while the Qur'ān is the supreme source of law for Muslims there are extra-Qur'ānic sources of Islamic jurisprudence: the example and words of the prophet Muhammad, the general consensus of Muslims, and *ijtihad* or jurisprudence, by which virtually any Muslim may contribute to the religious interpretation of the Qur'ān (al-Hibri 505–6). There is no indication that Jefferson recognized these alternate sources of Islamic jurisprudence. The opinion of the Qur'ān he voiced as he compared it with Blackstone suggests that Jefferson recognized a basic problem with Islam: its followers accepted the words of the Qur'ān without question and without consulting supplementary texts useful for interpreting sacred text.

What may be the most chilling reference to the Qur'ān in Jefferson's writings occurs in a 1786 report he and John Adams submitted to John Jay, then secretary of foreign affairs. The two had been commissioned by the United States government to meet and possibly arrange a treaty with Abdrahaman, envoy of the sultan of Tripoli. Algiers, Morocco, Tunis, and Tripoli constituted the Barbary Coast, a land whose pirates had been terrorizing American merchant vessels and taking American merchant sailors prisoner and holding them for ransom. The Muslim states of the Barbary Coast endorsed the practice of piracy—provided it was carried out against infidels in the name of Islam (Kitzen 1). In colonial times, American vessels were protected from the Islamic corsairs because Great Britain paid the Barbary States tribute—protection money to guard against piracy. With American independence, the Barbary pirates were free to attack the new nation's merchant vessels because the American government refused to

pay tribute to the nations of the Barbary Coast. Sanctioned by their government, the attacks of the Barbary pirates on American merchant vessels represent an early example of state-sponsored terrorism directed toward civilian American targets.

At their meeting, Adams and Jefferson asked the Tripoline ambassador on what grounds his nation made war upon other nations that had done their people no harm. They let him know that as representatives of the United States they considered friends everyone who had done them no wrong nor had given them any provocation.

The ambassador explained that the conduct of the Barbary Coast pirates "was founded on the Laws of their Prophet, that it was written in their Koran, that all nations who should not have acknowledged their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon them wherever they could be found, and to make slaves of all they could take as Prisoners, and that every Musselman who should be slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise" (*Papers* 9: 358). Even today, especially today, the ambassador's words have a chilling effect.

The encounter with the Tripoline ambassador gave Jefferson an object lesson regarding the profound danger that could come from relying on a single text without recourse to supplementary texts and alternative interpretations. Surely, if a religious text seemed to sanction war, its readers ought to research how others interpreted the text as a means of achieving some clarity before rushing into battle. Abdrahaman and the Muslim pirates whose behavior he sanctioned saw no need to consult other texts to justify their behavior. Everything they needed to know was in the Qur'ān, and what was not in the Qur'ān they did not feel a need to know.

As for himself, Jefferson recognized that he needed to know more, a great deal more, and he began reading deeply on the subject. After meeting with the ambassador, he acquired several books pertinent to the study of Islam including Yazdi Sharaf al-Din 'Ali's *Histoire de Timur-Bec* (Sowerby, no. 310); Sauveur Lusignan's *History of the Revolt of Ali Bey* (no. 314), which contained detailed information regarding Egyptian politics and government; and Paul Rycaut's *History of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (no. 324), a work whose stylistic excellence and scrupulous objectivity in describing Turkish politics prompted Rycaut to be "hailed as the new Tacitus" (Anderson 240).

Gradually, Jefferson developed an interest in learning Arabic. In the

early 1770s, the friendship he developed with Samuel Henley, professor of moral philosophy at William and Mary, offered him a good opportunity to further his interests. Best known as editor and annotator of William Beckford's *Vathek*, Henley was an expert Orientalist, and his copious notes to *Vathek* indicate that he was not only familiar with Sale's translation but that he also knew the Qur'ān in its original. In the late 1770s Jefferson expressed his interest in the languages of the Near East by acquiring a book entitled *Poeseos Asiaticae Commentariorum*, a Latin work by Sir William Jones containing a historical and critical survey of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish poetry (*Papers* 8: 13).

Before long, Jefferson began teaching himself to read Arabic. He acquired some basic Arabic grammars including *Rudimenta Linguae Arabicae*, by Thomas Erpensius, and *Simplification des Langues Orientales*, the Arabic grammar prepared by his friend and correspondent, C.-F. Volney. He also obtained a copy of Heinrich Sike's edition of the infancy gospel with the text in Arabic and Latin on opposite pages. In addition, he added a copy of Euclid's *Geometry* in Arabic to his library (Sowerby, nos. 4744–4747). Taken together, these works show that Jefferson's systematic attempt to learn Arabic closely paralleled the procedure he had established for learning other languages during his student days. He familiarized himself with basic grammar, read a text in the new language with a parallel text in a familiar language adjacent, and then read a familiar text in the new language. Not only did Jefferson recognize the importance of learning Arabic himself, he also recognized that other Americans should have the opportunity to learn the language. Revising the laws of Virginia in the late 1770s, he drafted a bill that proposed expanding the curriculum of William and Mary to include Oriental languages (*Papers* 2: 540).

In the preamble to a more famous piece of legislation he drafted around the same time, the "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," Jefferson wrote that all attempts to influence the mind "by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion" (*Papers* 2: 545). Retelling the story of the legislative debate over this bill in his autobiography, he wrote:

> Where the preamble declares that coercion is a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, an amendment was proposed, by in-

> serting the word "Jesus Christ," so that it should read, "a departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion." The insertion was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination. (*Writings* 40)

As Jefferson's editors have observed, there is no mention of this proposed amendment in the surviving records (*Papers* 2: 552). In other words, the Virginia legislators might not have had Mahometans in mind when they debated the bill, but Jefferson did when he wrote it.

A champion of religious freedom, Jefferson was willing to let fellow Americans practice whatever religion they chose, Islam included. Despite his willingness to allow believers to practice Islam and his strenuous efforts to learn more about the religion and to read Arabic texts in the original, the Qur'ān and its teachings remained essentially alien to Jefferson's personal experience. In a letter he wrote to John Adams in the early 1790s, he again used the Qur'ān for purposes of comparison. Referring to an article in the Connecticut papers, he explained its irrelevance to both a political pamphlet by Thomas Paine and an essay of his own by saying that the article "had no more relation to Paine's pamphlet and my note than to the Alcoran" (Cappon 251). The Qur'ān remained so alien to Jefferson's experience that it became useful in this, an analogy for irrelevance.

What Jefferson found most disturbing about the Qur'ān was the Islamic claims to its infallibility. By the time he acquired his copy in 1765, he had already developed a rigorous habit of checking and cross-checking many different sources on the same subject as a means of validating the ideas he encountered. To Jefferson's mind, no written text could claim such absolute authority as Islam attributed to the Qur'ān. As he later recommended to Peter Carr, "Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear" (*Papers* 12: 15). Reading the Qur'ān as his formal legal training was coming to a close, Jefferson had already developed the critical ability to recognize it for what it was—and for what it was not. On his library shelves and in his mind it remained at a halfway point between paganism and Christianity.

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